

The Man Born Blind and the Anglican School

Sermon for Morning Prayer
Anglican Schools Australia Conference
Radford College Chapel, Canberra
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Psalm 78: 16-38, John 9: 18-38

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Our Anglican schools have to live and contend with the unpopularity of Christianity. Many staff, along with most parents and students, have nothing to do with the Church. While Church schools are increasingly popular in aspirational Australia, our faith is not.

In response our schools might try to commend a post-institutional, even post-ecclesial version of Christianity. At one end of our Anglican spectrum that will mean leaving behind liturgy and sacraments and all that boring old stuff for a purer, truer gospel but also one that doesn't jar to much with unchurched social norms. At the other end of our spectrum, we might find a progressive humanism, environmentally and multiculturally tinged, with Jesus always welcome as a teacher of inclusiveness and an example of universal benevolence. This more liberal approach aims to form the conscience, though in a way that remains compatible with standard middle class life choices.

In between these options we might comfort ourselves by remembering the famous comprehensiveness of Anglicanism and its characteristic investment in the common good. If so, we can be content that our schools produce rounded citizens able to take their place in the world—as some like to say, by helping them be the best that they can be. And if some of us are uneasy about the reach of worldliness into our schools, we'll likely confine our outrage to matters of sexuality and gender, leaving conspicuous wealth, pride and indifference well alone.

But then we come together before the man born blind in John's gospel today—an exquisitely revealing passage using ophthalmology as a pointer to theology. Friends, this is not about exalting the sovereign God of miracles and the literal truth of scripture, because Jesus's miracles primarily bear a sign function in John's gospel that we need to understand. It's not a progressive message about the theology of disability or social inclusiveness, either, or at least not primarily. And it's not about Jesus helping the man born blind to be the best that he can be! Instead, it's an account of how the good news of Jesus Christ works, and what it's up against.

The good news of Jesus Christ, the light of the world, acts to show up the darkness of sin and godlessness according to John's Gospel. This is a confrontation leading all the way to the twin scandals of cross and resurrection. Here there is no separation of grace and judgement, because for John they're two sides of the one

coin. The light shows up the darkness; as the man born blind is enabled to see and to understand, so the blindness and stubborn resistance of the religious authorities increases. Jesus's love and grace confronts a recalcitrant religio-cultural status quo, which arcs up in reaction.

So, friends, God's mercy and acceptance as revealed in Jesus Christ bring judgement. They do this by showing up our lies and self-deceptions, but who'll really welcome that? Not many in our post truth world of culture wars and mutually defining rivalries will welcome it—for instance, on the far right, the bitter and strident outliers in the referendum “No” case, and the resolute climate change deniers, or else on the far left the furies of cancel culture with their taste for blood. Even in our Churches we regularly find pockets of stubborn spiritual dysfunction, and in at least some of our schools. In all these cases there are people who receive the truth of love, grace and forgiveness as a threat that they must resist because of the harm it would do to their rusted-on mean spiritedness.

But also to their smug self-assessments. Many people are a lot like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who resented the good news of Christ's gospel because things for him were fine as they were—because the message of mercy and forgiveness brought the unwelcome implication that he needed mercy and forgiveness in the first place. Here we see that mercy and forgiveness logically bring with them the flip side of judgement, because they show up a need and an absence

that we don't otherwise see, and that we wouldn't otherwise acknowledge. So, at a point where many hearts are broken by the shock discovery of being loved and forgiven, so that lives are converted, others resist violently—like the pharisees eager to reject and expunge the good news.

One result of this resistance is that the idea of an angry and wrathful God perseveres in our Christian imagination. Why? Because that's what so many need God to be like. We resist our own liberation and conversion by deploying this angry god, made in our own image, against those we consider to be enemies—and especially against those daring to claim that God is love, because that scandalous belief threatens the toxic religion to which many cling. This is what we see in today's Gospel account of the man born blind.

I suggest that Scripture's burden is to effect this conversion in our imagination, from wrath to grace, and with that from closed tribalism to open generosity and welcome. Today's psalm provides a good example of this, with its oscillation between a God of wrath and a God of grace as God's people regularly forget God's regularly reiterated goodness. Until eventually in today's psalm we see mercy and indeed tenderness winning out:

Yet he, being merciful, forgave their iniquity

He remembered that they were but flesh:

like a wind that passes and does not return (Psalm 78: 37, 38).

Friends, I think that the oscillation of wrath and mercy that we see in this psalm reflects what we must face in ourselves, because we project our own wrath onto God while being called over and again not to do so. Until finally in John's Gospel we're invited to see that God's wrath is really nothing but the confronting, world transforming force of God's love—a force to break open hard hearts and closed worlds. And the ultimate revealing of both together is the resurrection. Here I'm reminded of Charles Wesley's memorable Advent refrain:

Deeply wailing,
Deeply wailing,
Deeply wailing,
Shall the true Messiah see.

Because the true Messiah they'll see brings the greatest scandal: that we are loved and forgiven by God, in light of which we can let go of every pretence, every self-justifying illusion, in the face of a love fit to both break and remake us.

Now, the children in our schools need this good news, God knows, given all the statistics on depression, body shaming, oppressive parental expectations, broken homes and everything else that you know more about than I do. Yet this good news comes at a

cost, as we've been seeing. It has unease built into it, because as today's gospel of the man born blind shows us, God's love and mercy in Jesus Christ is often deemed scandalous, meeting avoidance and resistance. So, if we think our Christian witness as a Church bound up in the secular through its schools should be easier and more straightforward, we need to think again.

The Lord be with you ...